

ROBERT LITTLE, MA, MD, LAH, LM
Professor of Midwifery and Diseases of Women and Children
Royal Belfast Academical Institution, 1835-40

A Biographical Note

by

PETER FROGGATT, MD, PhD, FRCP, MRIA

Vice-Chancellor, The Queen's University, Belfast

and

W. GORDON WHEELER, MA, DipLib, FLA

Senior Sub-Librarian, The Queen's University, Belfast

ONE of us (PF) has described the unusual circumstances which led to the resignation, from his chair at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (hereinafter RBAI), of Robert Little, one of five foundation professors of the RBAI faculty of medicine.¹ The article included a short Appendix of biographical details which recent serendipitous findings prove to have been incomplete and in places erroneous. This present note is the result of more comprehensive research.

INFORMATION

Robert Little was the younger of the two surviving children (both sons) of a farmer whose family had been settled in Killyvolgan, near Ballywalter, County Down, for several generations.² He was born in the family homestead (Fig. 1)³ probably in 1801.⁴ Nothing is known of him until 1822 when he enrolled in Professor Jeffray's anatomy class at the University of Glasgow for the 1822-23 session⁵ (1 November 1822-30 April 1823), and then for the 1823-24 session he took classes in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland for which certificates for "Anatomy and Physiology [and] the Theory and Practice of Surgery," "Dissections and Anatomical Demonstrations," and for clinical lectures and diligent attendance to the practice of surgery at the Richmond Surgical Hospital, survive (Fig. 2).⁶ The regulations of Glasgow University required that only one of the three years (or rather sessions of six months) of the curriculum need be taken in the University⁷ and it was not unusual for the numerous students from Ulster⁸ to take two years' study elsewhere. Little, however, decided to take two sessions at Glasgow and he again enrolled in Jeffray's class for the 1824-25 session.⁵ His whereabouts for the next year are unknown—possibly getting class certificates for the other mandatory subjects on the extensive curriculum⁷—but he received the Glasgow University MD on 23 March 1826⁹ and also that year the Licence in Midwifery (LM).¹⁰

Sometime between then and July 1827, when he became a member of the Belfast Medical Society,¹¹ he settled in Belfast.¹² On 1 November 1827 he qualified Licentiate of Apothecaries Hall (LAH) in Dublin¹³ and in May 1828 he was appointed medical attendant to No. 4 District of the Belfast Fever Hospital dispensary, viz., that "bounded by Lodge-lane, Millfield, Mill-street, and Falls road," sharing duties with Dr. T. H. Purdon then, during 1829-30, with Surgeon

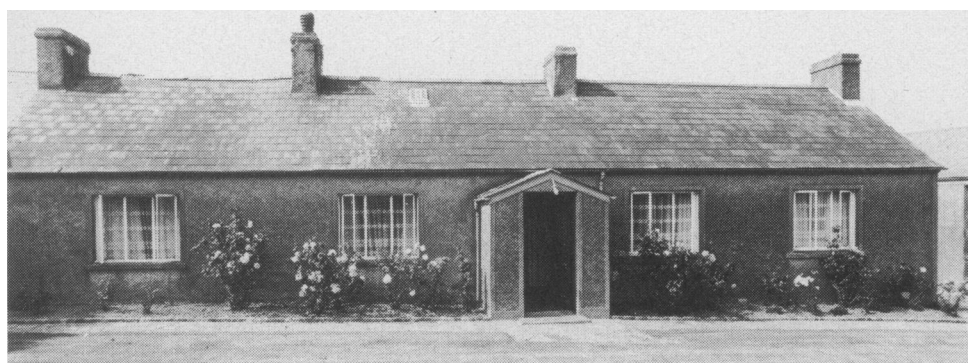


FIG. 1

The Little family former homestead at Killyvolgan, Ballywalter, County Down where Robert Little was born probably in 1801. The left-hand section is the older but the complete house (without the porch) is shown in the 1835 Ordnance Survey. (See also references note 3).

Joseph Bryson.¹⁴ One of us (PF) has recorded elsewhere^{15, 16} Little's career in Belfast until his resignation from his chair at RBAI on 5 May 1840 "having made arrangements to leave the country about the 1st of the next month"¹ but original papers recently uncovered now allow us to refer to his previously unknown ambitions with respect to the chairs of midwifery at the University of Glasgow and in the Queen's University in Ireland¹⁷ and to add to our biographical knowledge.

Little was appointed an "attending physician" to the Belfast Fever Hospital probably in May 1830 when his degree of MD was "accepted" by the hospital's Board of Management.^{18, 19} On 20 May he opened his *soi-disant* "the Belfast Lying-in Charity,"¹ and in its first five years "upwards [of] 1,200 females have been attended during labour; and advice has been given on the Diseases peculiar to Women and Children, to nearly 8,000 patients."²⁰ He also lectured students at his "Charity" as well as at the Belfast Fever Hospital and, from 1832-3, at RBAI on the theory and practice of medicine.¹⁶ Both Little and his "Charity" were held in favour by *inter alios* James McDonnell, Henry McCormac and Thomas Andrews,²² three of the leading luminaries of the Belfast profession, while students benefitted from the practical experience: "The advantages which may be derived by a student attending cases of Practical Midwifery under Dr. Little, will be found much superior to those which he will have during his collegiate course elsewhere. For instance I attended the Midwifery Hospital in Edinburgh six months, during which time I had only four cases: under Dr. Little, twelve months, I had nearly one hundred."²³ The "Charity" however is as shadowy as the praise is clear. The (sparse) available facts have been collected in a previous article:¹ it is not to be confused with the larger Lying-in Hospital, then in Donegall Street, and forerunner of the Royal Maternity Hospital. It was Little's defence of the form of the diploma which he issued to students at his "Charity," and his insistence on his autonomy in the matter, that led to his difference with, and resignation from his chair at, RBAI.

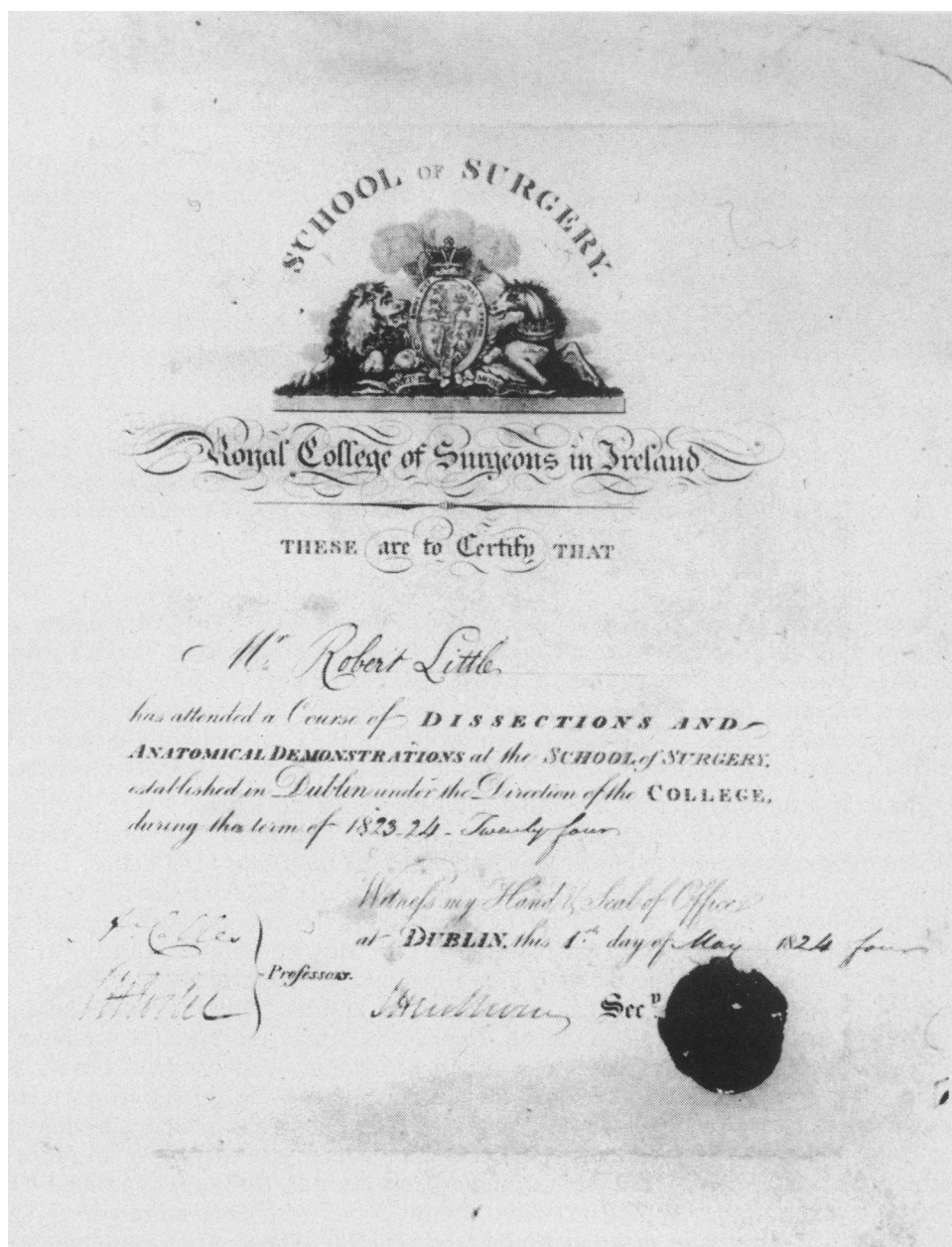


FIG. 2

A class certificate for 1822-24 in "Dissections and Anatomical Demonstrations" issued by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland to Robert Little. It measures $14\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The originals of those certificates mentioned in the text are in the possession of Dr. H. A. Warnock, Fortfield, Ballywalter.

In 1833, despite being only seven years in practice, Little applied for the Regius Chair of Midwifery at Glasgow University²⁴ which had fallen vacant on the death of the incumbent John Towers. Nine of the 24 testimonial letters which he submitted were written primarily for this purpose:²¹ they are dated between 20 and 23 November 1833. Ironically by this time the chair was filled through a Commission issued by the King on 16 October to Dr. Robert Lee, though Little, and other potential applicants for that matter, would not have known this because Lee's appointment was not reported to the University Senate until 20 March 1834, five months later, and despite the Crown Commission he was not admitted to office until 30 April!²⁵

This was not, however, to be the end of Little's academic ambitions for a university chair. He reprinted his book of testimonials in 1844,²⁶ and the following year, while probably living in Wolverhampton (see below), he obtained a reference from Henry Cooke, DD, dated 16 December 1845, which finishes "I consider him [Little] eminently qualified to fill the Chair of Midwifery to which he especially aspires, in any of the Irish Colleges [Belfast, Cork, Galway] about to be erected by her Majesty's government."^{17, 27} He seems nonetheless not to have been a candidate when these chairs were to be filled in 1849.²⁸

Little probably left Belfast in the summer of 1840.¹ During his 14 years in the city he had lived at four addresses²⁹ and this local *wanderlust* was now to be acted out on a larger stage. By this time he had married,² and there is a family belief that his wife dictated the wanderings! We have been unable to trace his immediate destination but he turns up as practising in Wolverhampton from at least as early as 1846 or 1847, first at 9 Church Street, and, from 1850 or 1851, at Darlington Street,³⁰ and by 1861 he had moved to 9 New Bridge Street, Manchester, from which address he registered under the 1858 Medical Act for the first time on 24 May 1860.³¹ He was soon again on the move, this time to Holywood, Co. Down, probably in 1862,³² and then in 1862 or 1863 he seemingly went to Scone, a small dairying centre in the mountains near the Hunter river about 150 miles north of Sydney, New South Wales.³³ We have no idea what prompted this self-imposed exile starting when he was over sixty: retirement, adventure, variety, *wanderlust*, family reasons? Nor do we know if his exile was all spent in Scone; but wherever he ranged he was back in Belfast by 1867 or 1868 this time at 10 College Street South,³⁴ voting for Thomas McClure in the 1868 elections,³⁵ still on the *Medical Register*, though we can't know whether or not in active practice.³⁶ He was certainly not connected with the Belfast General Hospital whose staff he had left in 1840,³⁷ nor seemingly did he rejoin the Belfast (since 1862 the Ulster) Medical Society.³⁸

Little was now in his seventies but his restlessness was unabated. At some time between 1870 and 1876 he moved to 105 Botanic Road.³⁹ Then, in 1881 or 1882, he moved to Donaghadee⁴⁰ perhaps on his attaining eighty, perhaps for reasons of health, perhaps at his wife's whim (again!) or on her death; but whatever the reason he soon tired of the seaside's attractions and within two years was back in Belfast, this time at 83 Corporation Street,⁴¹ and then in 1886 or 1887, when well in his eighties, he moved to probably his final address—4 College Street South near the house he occupied on his return from abroad 20 years before.⁴² He died on 27 February 1889 aged 87 and was buried in a family grave near the west wall in the Abbey graveyard at Greyabbey, Co. Down, two miles from his ancestral

homestead.⁴³ His only relics are an armchair ("the Doctor's chair") and a mahogany writing box with inscribed plate (Fig. 3) both in possession of his brother's descendants.

COMMENT

Little was a leading Belfast practitioner for over a decade (1827-1840): attending physician at the Belfast Fever Hospital (from 1830); *ad hoc* lecturer (1832-35) then professor (from 1835) at RBAI; treasurer, then president (dean), of the RBAI faculty of medicine (from 1835);⁴⁴ member of the Belfast Medical Society (from 1827); physician to the Ulster female penitentiary; physician accoucheur to his *soi-disant* "Belfast Lying-in Charity" (from 1830); author of a book on phthisis and several learned articles; recipient of favourable testimonials from the leaders of the Belfast profession; and university professor *manqué*. When he emigrated in 1840 there was small sign that the diploma affair at RBAI had affected him adversely:¹ he even considered returning to a Queen's College! Yet he seems to have subsequently confined himself to peripatetic private practice in other lands: we find no evidence of a subsequent hospital appointment or of further contributions to the literature. Equally unusual, his return to Belfast in 1867 or 1868, even though he was now



FIG. 3

A brass-bound mahogany writing box 19¾ x 11 x 6½ inches inscribed "R. Little M.D.," one of Little's few relics. It is in the possession of his great-grand nephew, Mr. George Little, The Firs, Killyvolgan, Ballywalter.

about 65, seems to have been unremarked, nor did he from the admittedly incomplete evidence, re-establish contact with the medical bodies he had previously graced. Strangest of all, his death seems to have gone unrecorded in professional journal, society, institution, or hospital minutes, or even in regional or local newspapers. Perhaps the RBAI affair had left its mark on his local professional standing (it was the cleric Henry Cooke, admittedly an influential one and no friend of RBAI, rather than a medical colleague who supplied his 1845 testimonial¹⁷); perhaps his travels had sapped his academic ambitions; perhaps simply his exile had pulled him from the centre of the stage to a permanent place in the wings of a rapidly growing Belfast when he returned to semi-retirement. We can't know.

More pragmatically, Little's emigration and eclipse, and the absence of memorabilia, documents, and letters, have made our task difficult and in part explain the lapses in a previous article.¹ Serendipity played a large part in our researches; Dr. Warnock's information might well have remained untapped but for his interest in writing to us. There are many gaps in the information in this note and a previous one¹ but we hope to have saved this respected co-founder of our first joint "preparatory" medical school from virtually complete oblivion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Mr. George Little, The Firs, Killyvolgan, Ballywalter, a great-grand-nephew of our subject, for allowing us to photograph the homestead and writing box in Figures 1 and 3, and to Dr. H. A. Warnock, Fortfield, Ballywalter, for lending us the certificate which appears as Figure 2. Both also helped in many other ways and Dr. Warnock first drew our attention to the Little tombstone in the Abbey graveyard, Greyabbey (See references note 43).

NOTES and REFERENCES

- 1 Froggatt P. The resignation of Robert Little from the chair of midwifery at Inst. *Ulster Med J* 1979; 48: 19-31. The five were: Robert Little, J. D. Marshall, Thomas Andrews, John MacDonnell, and J. Lawson Drummond.
- 2 For information on the Little family background we are indebted to Mr. George Little, The Firs, Killyvolgan, direct descendant of Robert Little's elder brother, who still holds the family land, and to Dr. H. A. Warnock, formerly medical officer in charge, maternal and child health division, Belfast County Borough, whose family is connected to the Little family by marriage. There have been Littles in Killyvolgan and one or other of the neighbouring townlands of Black Abbey, Ballybryan and Inishargy since at least the late seventeenth century. The *Griffith Valuation* of 1863 records William Little, Robert's elder brother, as holding over 63 acres in Killyvolgan and a further two in Black Abbey; a Hugh Little is in possession of over 30 acres in Black Abbey.
- 3 Part of the house was rebuilt in 1955 but the first Ordnance Survey of 1835 shows the same elongated cottage, without however its present porch. The oldest part of the building is the northern (left) half.
- 4 The date of death on the tombstone is 27 February 1889 "aged 87 years." Existing baptismal records for Ballywalter First Presbyterian Church commence only in 1824, and for Second Ballywalter, in 1820.
- 5 We are grateful to Dr. Derek A. Dow, Archivist, Greater Glasgow Health Board, for this and certain other information on Little's Glasgow career.
- A "Robert Little, Hilsborough" received the General Certificate of RBAI (a three-year post-school course in the faculty of arts) in 1820 and is entered in the (incomplete) School Album for that year as "Parents or Guardians and Residence: James Little, near Drumbo." A "William Little" is entered for 1819 (no parents, guardians, or residence given) but did not receive the Certificate. Despite the address the coincidence is striking especially since no other Littles are listed for

1814-23. It was common for particularly country presbyterians to study at RBAI prefatory to a university, and the address given may have been of a relative (possibly even the boys' father, if we may identify this James Little of Drumbo with the James Little "late of Inishargy" on the family gravestone). Certainly the dates are about right for the Little brothers of Killyvolgan! See also Note 43 below. (School Album 1814-1876 (PRONI: SCH524/1A/1); Fisher JR, Robb JH. *Royal Belfast Academical Institution: Centenary Volume, 1810-1910*. Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, 1913, pp. 211, 248-9).

- 6 These three class certificates and other papers are in the possession of Dr. H. A. Warnock (see note 2 above). RCSI records are unhelpful for this period. (We wish to thank Dr. J. B. Lyons, professor of medical history, RCSI, and Dr. Eoin O'Brien, Charitable Infirmary, Jervis Street, for advice on the College and other contemporary archives).
- 7 Coutts J. *A History of the University of Glasgow from its Foundation in 1451 to 1909*. Glasgow: Maclehose, 1909, pp. 541 *et seq.*
- 8 This was before the Medical School opened at RBAI (in 1835) which took many students who would previously have attended Edinburgh or Glasgow.
- 9 We are indebted to Mr. Michael S. Moss, Archivist, University of Glasgow, for this and other data from the roll of graduates. The submission of a thesis was apparently optional at this time (Coutts, *op. cit.* p. 544), and Dr. Dow (see note 5 above) has been unable to trace any thesis title registered in Little's name.
- 10 Little's entries in the *Medical Directory* from 1870 show "L.M. Glasg. 1826." These entries were compiled from responses to annual circulars, but his previous entries do not record this qualification (see also note 30 below).
- 11 Minute Book, Belfast Medical Society, 1822-28, 2 July 1827.
- 12 In High Street. 'A list of subscribers to the Belfast Medical Library,' in—*Ibid.*, 1842-52, p. iii; *Annual Medical Report of the Dispensary and Fever Hospital of Belfast*, 1827-28, p. 7.
- 13 This information was kindly supplied by Dr. Malachy Powell, Department of Health, Dublin, who is custodian of the Apothecaries Hall records. The qualification allowed the holder to sell or charge for medicine without fear of prosecution by apothecaries.
- 14 *Annual Medical Report of the Dispensary and Fever Hospital of Belfast*, 1827-28, p. 7; 1828-29, p. 5; 1829-30, p. 5; 1830-31, p. 5.
- 15 Froggatt P. The foundation of the "Inst" medical department and its association with the Belfast Fever Hospital. *Ulster Med J* 1976; 45: 107-145.
- 16 Froggatt P. The first medical school in Belfast, 1835-1849. *Medical History* 1978; 22: 237-266.
- 17 Little's book of testimonials compiled for his application for the chair at RBAI in 1835, as republished in 1844, is in the possession of Dr. H. A. Warnock (see note 2 above)—*Testimonials in favour of Robert Little, M.D., Consulting Physician to the Belfast Hospital, Physician to the Belfast Lying-in Charity and Dispensary for the Diseases of Females and Children, Etc., on the occasion of his being elected Professor of Midwifery and Diseases of Females and Children in the Royal Belfast College*. Belfast: printed by Hugh Clark and Company, Corn-Market, 1844. It consists of (24) letters of recommendation from colleagues, students, and prominent citizens, a form then usual. It is paginated 1-20 and has one hand-written letter inset—from Henry Cooke, D.D., headed "Belfast, 16th December 1845." The book is referenced below as *Testimonials*.
- 18 *Annual Medical Report of the Dispensary and Fever Hospital of Belfast*, 1829-30, pp. 3-4.
- 19 Minutes of the Board of Management of the Dispensary and Fever Hospital of Belfast, 9 May 1830.
- 20 *Testimonials*, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Introductory letter from Little to secretary, RBAI. The *Belfast News Letter* during May 1830 makes no reference to the opening of the Charity.
- 21 *Testimonials*, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 15, 18; letters from respectively McDonnell, McCormac and Andrews.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 12, letter from Samuel Blackwood, "senior medical student." See also pp. 10-11, letter from James Maxwell, "senior pupil, Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin."
- 24 Little's application was forwarded, correctly, to Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

- 25 The intricacies of appointments to the Regius chairs of midwifery, surgery, botany, and chemistry are described in Coutts, *op. cit.*, (ref. no. 7), pp. 526-7. Lee did not last long in office. Having successfully delivered a Latin Essay before the Senate on 30 April and been admitted as professor, he resigned on 2 July possibly because he was not prepared to fulfil his promise, given on 30 April, to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith at the next meeting of the Glasgow Presbytery. William Cummin was appointed to succeed by a Crown Commission of 16 July 1834 and took up office on 10 October (see ref. no. 5). No material relating to Little's application apparently survives in the relevant Home Office papers held by the Scottish Record Office or the Public Record Office, London. (We are indebted to Mrs. Rosemary Barbour, Scottish Record Office, for arranging the searches).
- 26 There was much parliamentary and public debate at this time concerning the foundation of provincial colleges in Ireland which would include faculties of medicine (Moody TW, Beckett JC. *Queen's, Belfast, 1845-1949. The history of a university*. London: Faber and Faber, 1959; I, pp. liii-lxvii).
- 27 *An act to enable Her Majesty to endow new colleges for the advancement of learning in Ireland* (8 & 9 Vict., c. 66) received the Royal Assent on 31 July 1845. This established the Queen's Colleges at Belfast, Cork and Galway.
- 28 There is no reference to Little as a candidate for a post in any of the three Queen's Colleges amongst the Chief Secretary's Office papers for 1845-49; similarly the actual applications and testimonials submitted during the same period (State Paper Office OP 1849/124) include nothing from Little. We are obliged to Miss Anne Neary of the State Paper Office in Dublin for searching these relevant files in Dublin Castle.
- 29 After his initial address in High Street in 1826-7 (see note 12 above), local directories show him at: 94, Donegall Street (1830 or 1831 -), 92, Donegall Street (1834 or 1835 -), 9, Donegall Place (1837 or 1838 -), and 59, Upper Arthur Street (1838-40)—local directories 1831-2, 1835-6, 1839 and 1840-1 respectively. 94 and 92 Donegall Street were probably the same (renumbered) house.
- 30 Local directories for Wolverhampton, 1847, 1851. *London and Provincial Medical Directory*, 1848 *et seq.* (hereinafter *Directory*); the edition for 1861 shows him as still in Church Street, in conflict with the local directory. The seeming red herring of his entry in the *Directory* for 1851 ("MA, MD (Giessen) 1824") is discussed in ref. no. 1, Appendix. There is no record of his Wolverhampton activities in the minutes of the local Area Health Authority (earliest minutes held are 1852). We are grateful to Miss Tuck for having a search made of all the Authority's historical files.
- 31 *The Medical Register*, 1861.
- 32 *Directory*, 1862. This may have been a sojourn with relatives prefatory to his emigration to Australia. A "Joshua Little" appears in the 1861 *Griffith Valuation* list as living at 27, Church Street, but no relationship is known, neither is Robert's wife's maiden name. A "Mrs. Little" is entered for Hibernia Place in the 1865 local directory, but would he have left his wife behind when on his wanderings? They are thought not to have had any children; certainly none survived them.
- 33 *Directory* for each of 1863-68 lists him as a "registered non-resident" i.e. domiciled outside the United Kingdom. The roll of graduates of Glasgow University shows him to have been some time at "Scone, N.W. Wales"—this clearly being a misprint for "N.S. Wales."
- 34 Local directory for 1868. The *Directory* for 1869 shows him accurately as a United Kingdom resident "Provincial" section but entered as "address unknown;" that for 1870 also accurately as at 10, College Street South, Belfast.
- 35 *List of the Electors of the Borough of Belfast, who voted at the General Election, 1868 . . . showing for whom they voted*. Belfast: Adair, 1869.
- 36 Little's last entry in *The Medical Register* is for 1872: thereafter he appears not to have answered the Registrar's enquiries or else requested his name to be dropped as having ceased to practice (sect. XIV, Medical Act, 1858). He would by then have been 70. However, he continued to complete the annual circular for the *Directory* for another ten years, until 1882, when he was 80.
- 37 The *Annual Reports* fail to list him as a subscriber at any time, nor is there any note of his death (on 27 February 1889) in the *Annual Report* for 1888-1889 or in the Minutes of the Medical Staff Committee (for 5 March and 2 April 1889) or the Minutes of the Board of Management for 2, 9, 16 and 23 March 1889.

- 38 The Minute Book of the Society for 30 April 1862 to 8 January 1885 is unfortunately missing, but in the next Minute Book Little does not appear as in attendance at any meeting nor is his death recorded.
 - 39 Local directory for 1877; *Directory* for 1876. He was still at College Street in *Directory*, 1870; and *Slater's Royal national commercial Directory of Ireland*, 1870. Botanic Road was a terrace of houses numbered as part of Great Victoria Street; it is now incorporated into the west side of Shaftesbury Square.
 - 40 *Directory*, 1882. The entry is simply "Donaghadee, Co. Down." He was still in Great Victoria Street in 1880-81 (*Directory*, 1881; *Slater, op. cit.*, 1881).
 - 41 Local directory for 1884; Register of Voters for 1885.
 - 42 Local directory for 1887. The next local directory was published in 1890 but Little had died on 27 February 1889.
 - 43 The gravestone inscription reads: "Erected by Wm Little, Anno Dom. 1794. Here lieth the body of George Little who departed this life on the 25th of June 1792 aged 21 years. Also his mother Mary Wallace otherwise Little who departed this life 22 of January 1793 aged 57 years. Also here lies the body of James Little late of Inishargy who departed this life 13th April 1822 aged 45 years. Also his wife Jane Little alias Forsyth who departed this life July 23rd 1836 aged 61 years. Also Francis Little, son of William Little, of Killyvolgan, who departed this life 17th July 1862 aged 22 years. Also John Little, son to William Little of Killyvolgan who departed this life 4th July 1878 aged 28 years. Also Ann Little, wife to the said William Little, who died 28th July 1884 aged 77 years. Also here lieth the body of William Little of Killyvolgan who departed this life on the 30th September 1887 aged 90 years. Also Doctor Robert Little who died at Belfast 27th February 1889 aged 87 years."
- It has not been possible to enlarge on the cause or circumstances of Little's death, as there is no entry in the records of the General Register Office. A search of the will probate records in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland for details of the value and dispersal of Little's estate has likewise been fruitless. Nor have we been able to trace an obituary or even a death notice in any medical journal or General Hospital or even RBAI records where he had been a founder medical professor over 50 years before. There is not even an obituary notice in the *Belfast News Letter*, the *Northern Whig*, the *Newtownards Chronicle*, the *Down Recorder*, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons (Glasgow), or existing Scottish newspapers. (We are grateful to Miss Jean S. A. Robertson, Glasgow University Library, for these last two items of information).
- 44 He was a conscientious attender at early faculty meetings—27 of the (first) 30 from 8 October 1835 to 12 November 1837—thereafter less so (Minutes of the Faculty of Medicine, RBAI, 1835-49) (PRONI, SCH 524/3C/4, under dates).